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ABSTRACT

This paper defines the term "institutional research" and offers a brief history of its role and scope in higher education up to 1969. A rationale for increased conduct of institutional research by community colleges is presented along with guidelines of the Association of Institutional Research for evaluating the effectiveness of such research activity. (JS)

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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

OUTLINE

I. The Definition of Institutional Research

II. The Brief History of Institutional Research in Higher Education

III. The Scope of Institutional Research in Higher Education

IV. The State of the Art of Institutional Research as of 1969

V. Why More Institutional Research is Needed in the Community College

VI. Guidelines for an Effective Institutional Researcher and Research Office in College

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William Rainey Harper College
June 22, 1971

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The term "institutional research" did not make a solid entry into the vocabulary of higher education until the late 1950's. Although there are a number of differing definitions, I have chosen to utilize the Association of Institutional Researchers definition which states "Institutional research consists of data collection, analyses, reporting and related staff work designed to facilitate operations and decision-making within institutions of higher education."

Institutional research as a separate and distinct operation is a relatively new phenomenon for higher education in the United States. Although many activities now managed or coordinated by offices of institutional research have been part of the responsibility of other division or departments in colleges previously, only in recent years have most colleges staffed special offices to carry out research functions.

Prior to 1955, only ten (10) colleges actively claimed offices of institutional research. By 1964, the number of institutions reporting institutional research had increased to 115. In 1965, the Association of Institutional Research (AIR) was created with a charter membership of 384 (I:1). Current membership in the AIR is estimated at approximately 900 institutions of higher education.

Institutional research in the junior college is an even newer phenomenon than in senior institutions. Herbert Swanson in a 1964 study found that only 19% of the nation's junior colleges had any formal organization for institutional research and that only four (4) colleges from a sample of 337 had persons assigned full-time to the function and only 9% of the junior colleges had a separate budget item marked for institutional research activity.

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As the concept of institutional research developed within institutions of higher education, a lack of clear definition and delineation of the role became apparent. Rourke and Brooks observed that the majority of colleges were concentrating their greatest efforts on questions related to academic programs but there still remained a substantial minority of institutions who were placing their emphasis on questions of organization and management. In reviewing the literature, one observes that these divergent views were purported by two well-known educators, i.e., Nevitt Sanford and John Dale Russell. Sanford advocated experimentation with innovations which would lead to the improvement of the learning process and saw long-term "action research" as the most legitimate function of the institutional research. On the other hand, John Dale Russell noted that "there was a different trend among well-administered universities (and some colleges as well) toward the setting up of offices for institutional research to facilitate studies of operational or managerial problems. Russell emphasized the institutional research on management, particularly financial management. Differing views are still apparent today, at least in observable practice. The array of practices seems to stem largely from the varying needs of individual institutions, the interest and competence of research staffs and the perception or prejudices of the officer to which the director of research reports. Perhaps the best summary of position on the role of an institutional research office is found in Saupe and Montgomery's pamphlet <u>The Nature and Role of Institutional Research</u> ... <u>Memo to A College or University</u>:

> "In many colleges and universities institutional research is limited to the development of administrative or management information and the pursuance of related special studies. Elsewhere, the institutional research effort is aimed at more

purely educational concerns in the areas of student development, curriculum, and instruction. Both of these focuses of effort are essential. Though they can be separated, they should not be independent. There is substantial merit in the marriage of them.

One of the most recent and note-worthy studies of the role of institutional research in higher education was completed in March, 1970, by Robert Roney III in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of Tennessee.

The purpose of Roney's study was two-fold: (II:4)

1) to determine the existing major role of institutional research as defined by the types of studies undertaken and

2) to determine how selected groups of administrators perceived the role of institutional research and whether their perceptions differed significantly from each other.

Roney conducted a survey during the spring 1969 of 220 institutions who had at least one active member in the Association for Institutional Research. Five groups of administrators (directors of institutional research, chief administrative officials, chief academic officers, chief fiscal officers, and selected college deans) were asked to complete questionnaires assessing the emphasis of academic and management research on their campuses. The responses were classified into one of three categories; 1) academic, 2) management or 3) combination. A return of 61.4% (656 administrative respondees) was obtained with an 80.5% sample of directors of institutional research returning their questionnaires. Roney summarized the findings as follows:

a) "Offices of institutional research were found to exist in a wide variety of institutions.

b) The mean length of time such offices had existed in June, 1969,

was less than five years.

c) "The directors usually held a doctor's degree, but the field in which this degree was attained varied considerably. Only five of the 177 directors responding indicated that the major in their highest degree was in research, but many were in fields which are often involved in behavorial science research.

d) "One hundred nine of the 177 directors held part-time positions in institutional research. The public institutions in the sample tended to be larger and tended to have a greater proportion of full-time directors than private institutions...

e) "Organizationally, the office most often reported directly to the president of the institution.

f) "The title most often carried by the chief institutional researcher was director.

g) "The studies most often undertaken by offices of institutional research in the sample were:

1. enrollment projections
2. coordination of completion of major questionnaires
3. faculty load
4. space utilization
5. a study at the request of a faculty group
6. development of a data collection system (Editorial comment)

h) "...In the majority of the institutions surveyed, a large proportion of the studies undertaken by Institutional Research were management in nature. The small, undergraduate institutions were, as a group, an exception to this rule...

"Large schools (9,999 enrollment) were more likely than smaller enrollment groups to perceive the role of Institutional Research to be in the area of management. Private institutions when compared to public institutions were less likely to perceive the role of the Office of Institutional Research as a combination than as an academic function.

"A greater proportion of graduate than undergraduate or two-year institutions perceived the role of Institutional Research to be a combination rather than one of academic emphasis.

i) "When the perceptions of the various groups of administrators as to the role of Institutional Research were compared, a significant difference was found. Deans differed from the other groups. When each of the other four groups (chief administrative officials, chief academic officers, chief fiscal officers, and deans) were compared independently with the directors of Institutional Research, only the deans differed significantly. The deans perceived the role of Institutional Research to be more often a combination effort than an academic one.

j) "The analysis of change from existing perceptions of the role of Institutional Research to the perceived ideal role revealed that all groups favored a move toward a combination effort rather than strictly management type studies."

Roney's five conclusions were as follows:

1) Institutional research, although developing at a rapid pace, was in 1969 still a relatively immature area of institutional life at most institutions surveyed.

2) In many instances the function was conducted in conjunction with other duties. This lack of full-time effort was most

often apparent in small institutions with resource limitations. On the other hand, there appeared to be a lack of commitment within institutions where full-time effort was warranted.

3) At many institutions there was a need for better communication of the role of Institutional Research to the institutional staff.

4) Many different types of studies were undertaken by institutional research. The needs of the institution and the background of the researchers were related to the studies done.

5) There was agreement among the groups of administrators surveyed that the role of institutional research should become a combination effort into which would be melded academic and management studies for the purpose of improving the overall functioning of the institution.

In the previous discussion, I have tried to relate some background and the state of the art of institutional research across the United States as of 1969. Prior to talking about the role of institutional research in the community college, I should like to discuss the prevailing disagreements of contemporaries among I R individuals in the Association of Institutional Research. I mention these in order that you may be aware of contemporary researcher biases if you are looking for an I R man.

1) There is a younger element of the Institutional Research group who sees the Institutional Research position as a line position where they can be involved in the decision-making authority of the institution rather than a staff position to a president or some other line officer.

2) Another group sees the position of Institutional Research as a staff position to the president or perhaps another officer where

facts are to be provided and recommendations made if called upon.

3) There appears to be disagreement on whether the research should be oriented toward professional goals or institutional goals.

4) Should research stress input measures or output measures?

And now to the position of Institutional Research in the community college. I trust that the previous discussion of Roney's findings may be helpful to those who are staffing, expanding, or reviewing the role of institutional research in your institutions. Perhaps we can discuss the relevance of Roney's findings to the community college later today.

Needless to say, the call for accountability from local citizens, state and federal government mandates the need for every community college to staff this institutional function adequately and not cut back institutional research support during times of academic depression. The newness of the community college movement and the inherent weaknesses of our faculty demand continued or even greater emphasis on institutional research activities in community colleges.

For those who may be tempted to cut back on institutional research support during these times of accountability and economic depression, I submit we will be weakening our bargaining power. If there is a tendency to reduce support for institutional research within institutions, I suggest four (4) causes:

1) Mission of institutional research is misunderstood.

2) Institutional research is structured improperly without top management goals.

3) Institutional research is staffed incompetently.

4) Institutional research is researching the wrong priorities.

If any of these are the case in our institutions, then I submit that this is a top management (presidential problem) that demands our attention and action for putting institutional research back on course.

I shall try to give further support to my position by pointing out that our community college faculties are definitely weak in the areas of experimental design, methods of research, and objective evaluation. This is not meant to be a critical comment but more a statement of fact resulting from the kinds of people we employ for teachers. Teaching-oriented faculties like ours need internal institutional research consultants while they are innovating and creating. As the old saying goes, "today's quality is tomorrow's reputation."

Community college spokesmen are often guilty of making many more claims than they can validate by objective research. This leaves us vulnerable when the question of accountability is called for by local citizens, legislators, state offices, or federal bureaucracies. In most states where community colleges have come of age, our senior higher education brothers are feeling us as a real threat for sharing the financial resources needed for operation and capital purposes. One of the best ways of knocking out the threat of community college sharing state financial resources is to point out their weakness or their inability to produce valid information on their results. This is presently happening in some states.

For those of us who have been around community colleges for a decade or more, we have seen ourselves studies, surveyed, observed, etc., by our senior institutional brothers - sometimes competently and effectively and at other times rather ineffectively. Needless to say, many of these studies have been helpful to the development of the community college during its early years but I submit that as we reach maturity and continue in the big

leagues of state and national resource competition our senior scouts will be looking for our most vulnerable weaknesses. Limited or bad data in our results will be a poor line of defense.

The Association of Institutional Research has produced some guidelines on effectiveness as it relates to the climate in which institutional research activity finds itself (XII:1-10). It may be a reasonable exercise for those of us who have institutional research activity to check our operations against these bench marks.

1) The administrative officers and faculty of the institution must understand the function of institutional research and value the use of data in decision-making. The institutional climate must be receptive to research on the institution.

2) The institutional research officer needs to be an accepted member of the administrative team and a person who is trusted and respected by the faculty. Not only is faculty cooperation needed in many phases of institutional research, but faculty as well as administrative acceptance of its results and its implications is often even more critical.

3) The institutional research officer must establish and maintain cooperative working relationships with the personnel of each of the several college or university operating offices -- admissions, registration, finance, business affairs, student affairs, data processing, and others. Because of his pervasive responsibilities he will need their trust, respect and support.

4) The institutional research officer needs to have access to knowledge of current problems and issues facing the institution. Without such knowledge his ability to provide timely information on central issues will be diminished and to this extent his potential effectiveness will be curtailed.

5) The institutional researcher should possess the ability to anticipate problems or issues before they occur. A completed study in the hand is worth two contemplated studies when a problem requiring immediate attention arises.

6) The institutional researcher must keep abreast of developments and research in higher education by attention to the relevant literature. Such a requirement applies to an individual in any professional field. It is certainly no sin to learn from the experience of others and to borrow ideas and techniques that have proved successful elsewhere. By the same token, the institutional researcher should be encouraged to share those portions of his experiences that are potentially useful to others.

7) The requirement of objectivity and detachment characteristic of all scientific endeavor has already been mentioned, but it bears re-emphasis. These qualities are the essence of any research responsibility and are the basis of the widely held view that the insittutional researcher should remain in a staff role, separate from policy determination and decision-making which often involve considerations extending beyond those provided by the results and implications of research.

8) The institutional researcher needs to possess skills in quantitative methods and research methodology in addition to a knowledge of higher education and administration.

9) Abilities in effective oral and written communication are major requirements for effective institutional research. Information may be superbly collected and analyzed; but if the information and its implications cannot be communicated with clarity and point, it may have little or no impact.

10) After institutional research is organized at a college or university in whatever form the organization takes, it should be subject to careful and periodic evaluation. It should be organized for clearly understood reasons and purposes, and its performance can be judged on the basis of such reasons and purposes.

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